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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

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Mining town in Montana endured the horrors of disease from asbestos

By Andrew Schneider
Of The Post-Dispatch

LIBBY, Mont. - Much of the asbestos-tainted vermiculite that spewed from the collapsing World Trade Center was dug from a mine in the Cabinet Mountains above this picturesque Kootenai River town. And in Libby, as in New York, environmental and health officials failed to disclose just how dangerous the mineral could be.

Miners digging vermiculite ore at the now-closed W.R. Grace Zonolite mine in Libby breathed dust containing asbestos fibers, then carried it home on their clothes to their wives and children. Trucks carrying the dust spread it throughout the town, and trains hauled the potentially lethal cargo to almost 300 towns across the nation.

The company knew it was deadly. But it did not require miners to wear respirators. Federal and state officials knew the dangers, but they looked the other way.

Until, that is, the death toll began to climb.

So far, hundreds of miners and their relatives have succumbed to the diseases caused by the asbestos fibers that painfully destroyed their lungs. Hundreds more are clinging to a torturous life, sucking air from portable oxygen bottles. And the federal government says its testing has found signs of the disease in thousands more who have been examined.

EPA and federal health investigators have been virtually living in this tiny town in the western corner of Montana just below the Canadian border since November 1999. Most arrived three days after the Seattle Post-Intelligencer reported the deaths and contamination.

They have studied the way asbestos kills - up close and far too

personal.

Their findings make suspect many of the absolute statements the government is making in playing down the hazards those living in lower Manhattan face from asbestos.

On Dec. 20, Montana Gov. Judy Martz offered an early Christmas present to the people of the tiny town, a "silver bullet." Every governor has one, just one, to use in getting the Environmental Protection Agency to designate a site or community for a Superfund cleanup. The cleanup in Libby was needed not only to decontaminate the area around the old vermiculite mine, but also the houses, yards and playground filled with asbestos-containing dust.

Also on that day, the EPA issued a detailed, real-world risk assessment of what asbestos actually did to the people of Libby and those elsewhere in the nation who used or still use expanded vermiculite ore from the mine.

"If the risk to the people of Libby is high enough to warrant the imposition of a Superfund designation, why are government agencies just shrugging off the fact that many of the apartments and businesses in lower Manhattan have identical levels of asbestos or higher?" asks Cate Jenkins, a senior chemist in EPA's hazardous waste division.

Little of what the government is doing about the asbestos from the twin towers surprised the people of Libby.

"It's the same damned government babble and indecision that led to half this town being either dead or dying from asbestos," says Les Skramstad, as he watches the news from New York.

"You'd think what happened here would have taught the government why it's important not to sweep this asbestos under the rug," says Skramstad, a former miner who is one of four members of his family with asbestosis from the vermiculite.

"Twenty or thirty years from now, when those New Yorkers start falling over dead, some young government bureaucrat will get all choked up apologizing for what the EPA and others didn't do.

"That's what they did here."

ASBESTOS AT GROUND ZERO

Reporter Andrew Schneider:

E-mail: aschneider@post-dispatch.com

Phone: 314-340-8101

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